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# **Conformity and resistance in personalized same-sex prayer rituals in Finland**

**Auli Vähäkangas**

## **Abstract**

This article studies the experiences of same-sex couples in connection with a prayer ritual conducted over their registered partnerships and focuses on the pre-legal context of same-sex marriage in Finland. The aim is to analyze conformity and resistance in the participants' understanding of personalized ritual through Grimes's categories of language, space, time, and actors. The findings reveal that most of the rituals had both elements of resistance that was understood as following the same-sex culture and of conformity with heterosexual nuptial traditions. Double affiliation with Christian and gay culture produces complex forms of conformity and resistance. Personalization of the religious rituals was more important to the participants of the study than following heterosexual traditions.

## **Introduction**

This article studies the experiences of same-sex couples in connection with a prayer ritual conducted over their registered partnerships and focuses on the pre-legal context of same-sex marriage in Finland. The Finnish parliament passed a law on registered partnerships in 2001 and in March 2017 same-sex marriages were made legal in Finland. The number of registered same-sex couples is rather small: only 4500 people lived in a registered partnership in 2013 (Statistics of state of Finland). After March 2017, upon the couple's request, registered partnerships were legally transformed into marriages. The discussion regarding the rights of same-sex couples to have a ritual for their partnership is a burning issue, both in the media and within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, the majority church can officiate a wedding and no civil marriage is needed, contrary to the practice in many other European countries (Bos 2017, 191). The officiating role of the ELCF also leaves it front and center in media discussions of same-sex weddings.

There are various recent studies on the relationship of state and church on same-sex rituals (Bos 2017; Derks 2017) but as a result of the Dutch context of these studies, they do little to shed light on the Nordic situation in which same-sex marriages are a more recent phenomenon. The Nordic context of same-sex partnerships has not been studied extensively. For instance, a recently published study (van den Berg 2017) focuses on the religious opposition to same-sex marriage in Sweden but does not deal with same-sex rituals as such. On the other hand, a Danish study analyzes the situation in

which the state has ordered the church to conduct a marital ritual for same-sex couples following the state's legalization in 2011 (Johansen & Pedersen 2015). This highlights the fact that the Evangelical-Lutheran church in Denmark is still a state church in the sense that the state can intervene in its decisions more easily than in Finland. Some research has also taken place regarding same-sex partnerships in Finland. However, these studies are either outdated (Hirvonen 2003; Hirvonen 2004; Kettunen 2007) or do not focus on the personal experiences of those concerned (Vikström 2016). I have previously analyzed the recognition of same-sex partnerships in the ELCF with Elina Hellqvist (see Hellqvist & Vähäkangas 2016; Hellqvist & Vähäkangas forthcoming). That said, even though these articles use the same empirical data as the present one, they do not analyze the religious ritual as such.

According to Grimes, the field of ritual can be mapped using set categories which help provide as strong a description as possible of the studied ritual. In striving to do this, Grimes (2010) advises looking for the ritual space, time, actors and language. However, even as rituals adhere to tradition, they are not static but rather contain an aspect of change (Grimes 2000, 12; Bell 1989; Hüsken & Neubert 2012). Johansen uses the term new rituals which are characterized by creative adaptation and continues, saying: "the scholarly interest in life-cycle rituals takes into account the fact that churches are placed in modern, secularised societies populated by people who relate individually to religion according to their own decisions and considerations" (Johansen forthcoming). Danbolt & Stifoss-Hanssen (2017) share the idea that the new ritual traditions help develop an understanding of contemporary religion.

Following her study of the personalization of post-mortem rituals, Ramshaw (2010) points out how personalization may facilitate the ability of a ritual to meet the most important requirements of the people involved. She further writes: "This equation of "meaningful" with "personal" is a giveaway of postmodern culture. When people are not embedded in a tradition-bearing community, the rituals of such a community do not seem to speak to their personal experience, the private world that is the locus of meaning-making. A ritual is likely to be meaningful to the extent that it is personally constructed or tailored to one's own experience" (Ramshaw 2010, 172; see also Schäfer 2007). A need to transform rituals to be personally meaningful was also found to be important during crisis (Danbolt & Stifoss-Hanssen 2017).

The literature on rituals for same-sex marriage reveals that some elements in the same-sex rituals were understood to show conformity, whereas others show resistance. Bell sees that the relationship between conformity and resistance is the fundamental dimension of rituals in which the following of an old tradition or the making of new traditions is the dividing issue (Bell 1997, 145). Lash studied

same-sex marriage rituals among Canadian Jews and came to the conclusion that those rituals which differed from heterosexual weddings and included various same-sex objects were rituals of resistance and those rituals most closely following the liberal Jewish traditions were rituals of conformity (Lash 2012). The division between resistance and conformity was not, however, very clear, as some of the rituals included both of these elements.

The discussions introduced above on ritual categories and the division of rituals into rituals of conformity and rituals of resistance as well as the tailoring aspect of a personalized ritual has guided the analyses of empirical data and the writing process of this paper. The aim is to analyze conformity and resistance in the participants' understanding of personalized ritual through Grimes's categories of language, space, time, and actors.

### **The discussion of same-sex partnerships in the ELCF**

With a membership of 71.9% of the population, the ELCF is the majority church in Finland (Information about the church, 2017). Despite a decrease in membership in recent years, the ELCF still maintains a strong influence on religious traditions in the country. The ELCF has a strong self-governing administration with an elected General Synod and Bishops' Conference, which make independent decisions without state involvement (Johansen & Pedersen 2015, 4).

Homosexuality, or more precisely the question of LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) church members is an internally divisive issue for the ELCF, with an extensive discussion on the role of LGBTI church members taking place from the 1990s up to the present day. One intermediate landmark was the Bishops' Conference Report in 2010, approved by the General Synod of the ELCF, which formulates the church's stand on registered same-sex partnerships (*The Consequences of the Law Regarding Same-Sex Relationships*, 2010). The Bishops' Conference issued a new report in October 2016 where it reiterates the principles of the 2010 report (*Report of the Bishops' Conference concerning the amendment to the Marriage Act* 2016).

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) prepared guidelines on marriage and human sexuality for member churches in 2007 which read: "Encourage churches to continue reflecting on their pastoral responsibility in response to a wish expressed by some people for a ritual for their committed partnership, without entering into marriage" (*Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue on Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality*, 2007). The Pastoral guidelines of the ELCF follow these instructions quite closely and do not give a predetermined rite to be used during such ceremonies. The guidelines simply indicate that the ritual can involve a prayer with the registered

couple and for them. Blessing of a partnership or any other rituals which could be interpreted as marital rites should not be conducted (*Pastoral guidelines* 2011). Despite these delineations, the discussion regarding homosexual members of the ELCF continued even after the Pastoral guidelines 2011 were given, but no new official guidelines have been provided since the legalization of same-sex marriage.

### **Data, method and structure**

The data consist of interviews of ten people, nine of whom have had a prayer ritual over their registered partnerships and including an interview with a pastor who has conducted many rituals over same-sex partnerships. The narrated rituals were conducted between 2005 and 2015. I conducted the interviews from May to October 2015 and the interviewees' ages range between 30 and 65 years. Three of the interviewees are men and seven are women, all of them from the greater Helsinki metropolitan area. Most of the interviews were individual but two interviews incorporated both of the female partners. All the interviewees gave their written consent to the study. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the interviewees.

The main channel of recruitment was the rainbow worship services, which are special services for the LGBTI minority in the ELCF. Additional recruitment was done via a closed Facebook group and also through existing interviewees' referral of suitable participants. All the persons interviewed were members of the ELCF, but two of their partners were non-members. Five of the interviewees were or had been employed by the ELCF and one was a student of theology. I used semi-structured interviews in which the themes of the particular ritual informed the structure. The first of these themes was the planning of the ceremony which also included the selection of a physical space. The second theme focused on the actors and actions within the ceremony. The final theme dealt with the interviewees' motivations to organize it. During the interviews I was shown pictures and copies of pastors' speeches, which helped me get a stronger understanding of the narrated rituals, as well as prompting the interviewees to remember the particulars of the day. Interviews lasted from half an hour to over one hour.

Unlike many who have written on this subject, I am a heterosexual woman with no direct experience of same-sex partnerships. My interviewees seemed to accept my conducting this study, even though I am not part of the rainbow community. Additionally, I am an ordained pastor of the ELCF which the pastors participating in this study knew in advance. I introduced myself as a researcher from the Faculty of Theology, but I did not hide my pastoral identity either.

The qualitative data stemming from these interviews was analyzed using theory-based content analysis, also called deductive content analysis, which is based on previous theoretical knowledge (Hsied & Shannon 2005). Grimes's ritual model (2010) was selected as a theoretical tool for theory-based content analysis. Following Grimes's categories, the first subsection of this study deals with what the interviewees called the ritual, thus limiting the focus on language to only the naming. The following subsection deals with the selection of a ritual space and the time in which the ritual was conducted. Finally, the last sections analyze the actors and actions of the ritual – analyzed only in relation to what they reveal about the aspects of conformity or resistance of the personalized ritual. After that, the aspects of conformity and resistance as well as the personalization of the ritual will be discussed further.

### **Name of the ritual**

The name of the ceremony emerged from the interviews and was vividly discussed during all of them. The name used in the Pastoral guidelines of 2011 is 'prayer with and for' the registered same-sex couple, but the interviewees expressed a dislike for this long and complicated name. Some called the ceremony a wedding, most labeled it a blessing of a registered partnership and a few simply called it a prayer ceremony. When the interviewees speak of their own ritual as a wedding I use the term as they used it, even though the rite was not legally a wedding due to the pre-legal nature of all the ceremonies discussed in this study. In the following section I will commence with the rituals which most closely followed the Pastoral guidelines of 2011.

Two of the interviewees, Pekka and Henrik, indicated that it was important to omit certain ritual elements, such as the exchanging of rings, from their own ceremony. It is interesting to note that both of these interviewees are theologians: Pekka is a pastor working in the ELCF and Henrik a student of theology. However, these two theologians refer to the ceremony as a blessing of their partnership, not just a prayer with and for them. The space of these two blessing rituals, however, differed. Pekka's ritual was conducted at home, whereas Henrik and his spouse opted to use a sacral space.

Hanna and her partner had met through girl scouts and chose to call their ceremony woodland—a picnic of love. This female couple explicitly excluded any traditional elements of a wedding in the ritual, but expressed a desire to have an official blessing of their partnership. The reason for avoiding nuptial symbolism was their personal wish to keep the ritual as simple as possible. Hanna, a youth

worker employed in a local ELCF parish, discusses the name and meaning of the prayer function and a registered partnership: “Sure it bugs me that we couldn’t be blessed and that our relationship couldn’t be blessed ... it’s the terminology, I mean some know to speak of it as marriage, but we’re registered ... like dogs and cars.” Hanna further elaborates the idea of a blessing and human value: “For me it’s personally enough to have my faith and the feeling that I was created this way and that I have a purpose and my life has a meaning, as does my relationship, and we are blessed and as valuable as others.” Hanna considered that the pastor, her colleague at the same parish, followed the Pastoral guidelines too closely and had even discussed the use of an official blessing of the couple with the vicar. The vicar, who was also Hanna’s superior, had advised following the given guidelines.

Maja & Ritva and Sari & Kirsi called their ritual a wedding. In the wedding of Maja & Ritva, the rite took place as a modified wedding ritual of the ELCF, whereas the rite used in the wedding of Sari & Kirsi was modified from the rite of a blessing of a marriage. In both of these rituals, exchanging of rings was central. Both female couples were actively involved in the rainbow worship community and in their weddings a special nuptial object, a rainbow-colored *ryijy* was used. A *ryijy* is a traditional Finnish woven craft work, a large wall mat, on which the bridal couple traditionally stand during a religious wedding ceremony. A similar use of rainbow-colored nuptial objects was also found in Canadian pre-legal commitment ceremonies (Lash 2012, 167). The rainbow-colored ritual elements celebrated the same-sex nature of the partners while also acknowledging their inclusion within the Lutheran tradition. In other words, these rainbow-colored objects straddled both the resistance and the conformity aspects of a ritual, as they were simultaneously strongly personalized ritual objects tailored for a small rainbow community in a ritual acknowledging the Lutheran tradition.

Matilda’s situation differs from that of the other couples in that she and her wife had been officially married in Canada a few weeks before the blessing of a wedding was organized in Finland. She referred to this ritual as a wedding, and it most probably followed the rite of a blessing of a wedding. In Matilda’s own words:

It was like a normal wedding ... We came in with both of our parents while the wedding music was on and we did stand on the same wedding *ryijy* of the church. The church warden was really involved, he rang the bells and did everything else as in a normal wedding.

The use of the same *ryijy* as for heterosexual bridal couples shows that there was no need of pointing to the special same-sex elements (Lash 2012, 167). This seems to indicate conformity to heterosexual ritual traditions.

Nuptial rituals are conceptualized as rites of passage which change the status of those involved. In a legal sense in the Finnish context, the actual rites of passage in connection with the prayer rituals of this study were the civil ceremonies of the registration of the partnerships. However, the names given to these rituals by the participants, blessings of registered partnerships or weddings, indicate that the religious rituals were also interpreted as rites of passage. This indicates that the blessing of a partnership was a central part of the ritual and many also labeled it accordingly. Hefling analyzes the meaning of a blessing in connection with the Episcopal same-sex rite in the USA: “A formal blessing on the part of the church is both thanksgiving for what happens and petition for its continuation, enhancement, and perfection” (2012, 10). The Finnish Lutheran bishops did not want to make as much of a statement in favor of same-sex unions, which is why they decided to restrict the use of blessings in same-sex rituals.

The name of the ritual indicated what type of language was employed throughout it and how meticulously planned the ritual was. Some objects became special because they represented the rainbow community, and others because they were traditional nuptial objects and indicated the committed nature of the partnership (compare to Grimes 2010, 23, 26-27). The most central object was the wedding rings, which, according to Chesser, is the oldest and most universal marriage symbol (1980, 205). The time and space of the ritual also correlated with the naming of it, a finding that will be further analyzed in the following section.

### **Time and space of a ritual**

All the rituals discussed in the narratives had been conducted in connection with the official registration of the same-sex partnership by a magistrate. Religious rituals were conducted either on the same day as the civil registration of the partnership or on the following day. Several of the participants made remarks relating to the selection and character of the ritual space. Two of the couples conducted the ritual in their own home, others in a public space (such as a festivity hall or in nature) and the remaining two couples highlighted the importance of having such a ritual in a sacral space. The selection of a space was not always a question of choice on the part of the couple because in some cases the local parish of the ELCF did not allow the couple to use a sacral space for the ceremony.

Two of the celebrations had been organized in the couples’ private homes. One of these rituals was Pekka and his partner’s blessing of a new home, and the other one was Heikki and his partner’s big festive event to celebrate the registration of their partnership and receive blessing for it. For both



couples to have the ritual take place in their private home was very important. Pekka explains the importance of home as a space: “I was brought up in the Zion hymn tradition in which the home is as important a space as parish hall or even a church”. He is referring to a revival movement inside the ELCF, which meets regularly in homes to sing their own hymns, called the Zion hymns. This discussion on the importance of home shows that rituals that were conducted in private homes were also seen to be of great significance to the couple concerned. In the ELCF, homes are widely used for religious rituals; for example, most baptisms take place in private homes. Having a religious ritual conducted in a private home follows, thus, a normal practice.

The rituals of Maja & Ritva and Sari & Kirsi, held a few years after the law on registered partnerships was passed in 2001, combined both the church and the magistrate as discussed previously. These two events had been organized in secular venues, as the interviewees explained that it was not permitted to use sacral spaces for same-sex couples at this time. Thus, for these couples a sacral space had not even been an option. The couples explain that they decorated the venues to suit the ritual and even built an altar in them.

Only two of the prayer rituals were held in a sacral space, one in a church and the other in a small chapel connected to a church. These were both the youngest interviewees, in their early 30s, and their ritual was conducted most recently. Matilda was not very religious herself, but her spouse was an active church member, which is why she also joined the ELCF just before the ritual: “I joined the church just because of this. Religion is not that important to me, but the church as a space is ceremonious” (Matilda). She explains the selection of a church: “That church is a familiar place to us and my wife likes to attend St. Thomas mass in it and I have attended few times as well.” The St. Thomas worship community is not a rainbow community, but open to various minorities inside the Lutheran tradition. Henrik, whose ritual was also conducted in a sacral space expressed the meaning of it: “I feel like that space is sacred, and that particular chapel is a familiar and secure space for me, also because of its history ... In that situation I was in front of God” (Henrik). He had previously attended rainbow worship services in the chapel and is a member of the specific local parish. This space simultaneously represented the same-sex community and Lutheran traditions, indicating once again both resistance and conformity of the ritual.

Additionally, the aspect of timing is a key for understanding the results of this study. What is most essential is whether the prayer ritual happened before or after 2011, when the Pastoral guidelines were given. Rites conducted before 2011 were more creative and free and included more symbols of the rainbow community, thus functioning as examples of rites of resistance towards heterosexual traditions to a greater extent. The rituals conducted immediately following the Pastoral guidelines,

followed the restrictions of the guidelines most diligently and the very last ritual, the wedding of Matilda and her wife, clearly represented a ritual of conformity. Lash found a similar indication of timing in her study, she found those rituals that were conducted after the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada to be rituals of conformity while the pre-legal rituals had more elements of resistance (2012).

Most of the venues discussed above were temporarily employed as such for the ritual, only the official sacral spaces were permanently ritual spaces (compare to Grimes 2010, 20-21). None of the spaces were chosen at random. The timing of the rituals influenced the selection of the space as well as the content of the ritual. The following section deals with the actors within the ritual in the various spaces selected for it.

### **Couple, pastors and guests as actors**

In the narratives of the ceremonies, the various actors during it were central. The most important actors were naturally the couple concerned. Additionally, the interviewees indicated that an important part of the preparation included the selection of a pastor and a discussion on the role of marriage registrars in the civil ceremony. The third most important actors in the ceremony were the guests who were invited to it.

Selection of attire indicated both resistance and conformity of the ritual traditions. Sari and Kirsi chose to wear dark suits but were advised by Kirsi's Mom to use different colored ties to avoid looking like Mormon missionaries. The decision to wear suits rather than dresses indicates the resistive nature of this female couple. Maja and Ritva decided to wear short, colorful dresses at their wedding, which also showed resistance to nuptial traditions. The only female couple to wear long wedding dresses was Matilda and her wife. Matilda showed pictures of their wedding gowns and explained: "They were not completely white. I had a peach color and hers was light gray." Apart from the color, however, the dresses resembled traditional female wedding attire. Heikki explains that he had a dark suit and his partner a light one, representing the traditional colors of bride and groom. Henrik explained a similar choice of suits: "I had a dark suit and he a slightly lighter one, but not a completely white one." Pekka and his partner did not want to wear suits at the informal ritual of the blessing of their new home but instead they both decided to wear black shirts. The selection of clothes shows how others followed more traditional nuptial symbolism in their clothing (Chesser 1980, 207) and others followed more the traditions of same-sex culture.

The second most important actors were the pastors, and in two blended ceremonies both pastors and marriage registrars. Pastors in all of the narrated rituals wore full liturgical clothing, even in those conducted in private homes. Liturgical clothing indicates that the pastors themselves considered these rituals to be more than just a private prayer session, otherwise they would have just used clerical shirts, not full liturgical clothing as they did. In the ceremonies of Maja & Ritva and Sari & Kirsi the marriage registrar came from the magistrate of Hyvinkää who was willing to travel to attend blended ceremonies even in other cities. She was the only registrar that performed personalized rites and had prepared a special speech, which was later gifted to the couple as a memento. Additionally, she wore a black gown as her ritual clothing which the couples expressed appreciation for while showing me pictures of it. In Finland, all marriage registrars are municipal employees and usually couples cannot choose a preferred marriage registrar (compare to Derks 2017). In other narrated rituals, the marriage registrars did not have a central role and these ceremonies had been conducted in a separate civil ritual. Apart from these two female couples, the couples had mainly disliked the civil ceremony because of its impersonal and mundane nature. The Dutch situation of civil weddings seems to be very different, Derks writes “the civil wedding ceremony is not only a matter of rights, but also of rites” (Derks 2017, 217).

Many of the interviewees asked pastors they knew from before to officiate. Sari & Kirsi selected a pastor who was Kirsi’s close friend and who had been active in the Students’ Christian movement with her. Maja and Ritva had two pastors and a marriage registrar conducting the combined ceremony. The first one was a rainbow pastor they were well acquainted with previously, and the other pastor came from Maja’s childhood home parish and thus represented Swedish-speaking Christians in Finland. Ritva explains the connection to this pastor: “We had both visited this Swedish-speaking pastor before. When your mother died it was she who invited you to the grief group ... And she had conducted a blessing of our home as well.” The pastors thus represented various identities during the narrated rituals, which is one reason why they were so central to it. Additionally, a pastor who knew the couple beforehand could more easily facilitate a tailored ritual. Most of the pastors were females, only the pastor who conducted the ceremony of Henrik and his spouse was male. However, none of the participants indicated the pastors’ gender to have been an important factor. Other qualities, such as the acceptance of same-sex partnerships, were frequently mentioned.

Heikki was the only participant who did not know the pastor beforehand and he initially tried to find one from his local parish:

It took three weeks, four weeks and I had called repeatedly and no response. I did not get any response at all, they just said that they will try to find out. I found this response to be very

negative and I was really disappointed. Then I started to search on the internet and found this network called Connection. (Heikki)

Through the Connection network, Heikki found a rainbow pastor who soon visited their home and planned the ritual with them. Connection is an ecumenical network which aims to connect sexual minorities with religious institutions in Finland and advocates for the acceptance and recognition of sexual minorities.<sup>1</sup>

The rainbow community seems to be partly separated from the official ELCF. This is exemplified by how the pastors who are active in it are called “rainbow pastors.” As Maarit, the interviewed rainbow pastor, explains: “We were operating within the LGBTI crowd. We were in the community and it didn’t even occur to us to tell the boss. Even I’ve blessed 14 couples.” She was later interrogated by her bishop over these same-sex ceremonies. Maja and Ritva also indicated that the rainbow community is separate from the ELCF: “We spent a lot of time in rainbow events and rainbow services and we have our own community within the church.” One additional reason why the rainbow community was so important to the participants is that some of the participants had been recruited via rainbow worship services, indicating a possible selection bias. However, it does not explain away the importance of this community as a whole.

Some interviewees were widely supported by family and friends: as Kirsi explains: “Both of our families have been very supportive, we had a lot of family and friends from both sides.” In many of the rituals, family and friends were not just passive guests but active participants in the ritual. Some of the guests read Biblical texts or sang during the ritual. This participation further personalized the ritual. The psychological and spiritual support of those present during the ceremony was found to be important, as Pekka clarifies:

And quite a few of the guest were also, let’s say, either employees of the church or linked to the church in a way ... and then the fact that the situation communicated a strong sense of a thing that, I could straight up call acceptance.

The presence of other church workers and active church members was important to Pekka, an ordained pastor himself, for whom recognition by the ELCF and its active members is significant. His family was not, however, invited to the ritual. Pekka explains that it was only at the funeral of his elderly mother, occurring after the blessing of their partnership, that his spouse met his siblings for the first time. A study by Smart revealed: “There is an ongoing debate on the meaning and

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<sup>1</sup>See more in Finnish at <http://www.yhteys.org/>

significance of both (given) families and (chosen) friends for same-sex couples” (Smart 2007, 1). In Pekka’s case the chosen friends were invited but the given families not.

Invitation of guests had also been somewhat challenging for Henrik, who postulated that two of his friends did not attend the ritual because of their religious beliefs. One of them told Henrik openly that he and his wife would not be attending the ritual because they are not in favor of same-sex unions. The other did not express it as openly; he just said that he was too busy on that day to attend the ceremony. Afterwards Henrik began to think that the actual reason was his faith which did not permit attendance at a same-sex ceremony. The examples of Henrik’s friends show that not all friends and relatives expressed support of the same-sex couples, but those who attended the ritual were most likely to show their acceptance and become actors in the celebration.

The various actors helped connect the individual and collective elements of the experience which, according to Grimes, is central in ritual (Grimes 2010, 27-30). The decision about which family members and friends to invite was difficult. Some actors represented the resistive aspects of the ritual, whereas others were clear indicators of conformity. All positively narrated actors played a personalizing function in the ritual, something that will be discussed in the following section in more detail.

### **Personalized Action as an ideal**

An important part of the action in the ritual was the speech and prayers by the pastor. All the interviewees remembered these as the most important part, as this involved the pastor indicating, to both the couple and the congregation present, an acceptance of same-sex partnerships. Heikki elaborates: “That speech when she spoke about our life, our home and partnership, work, friends and all of our life ... So, all of our guests were crying and also for me that speech was something that I will remember forever.” Heikki explained how they were standing on a rock in their garden and the pastor preached “God is like a rock, as eternal as love is.” The metaphor of the rock was very powerful to Heikki because the pastor had chosen a metaphor from his own precious garden to make it especially personal. Personalized action was additionally seen in the speeches that Heikki and his spouse had for each other. Matilda and her wife read poems to each other during their wedding ceremony which was a very important part of the ritual to them. Personalized action had been planned carefully and was remembered in the narratives of same-sex prayer rituals.

The venue used by Sari & Kirsi did not have a permanent altar, so the creation and decoration of an altar with stones became an important part of their ritual:

We had asked them to bring stones for the altar and it was really exciting because some brought stones which their spouses had given them thirty years before and these stones were from as far away as the Arctic Ocean. And these stones are now in our home altar and what did not fit there are at the summer cottage. (Sari & Kirsi)

The reasoning behind the selection of stones as focal objects was initially due to a severe flower allergy. However, these stones took on vast meaning within this ritual due to the personal message they represented. These stones indicate how important personal objects were in building a ritual (see also Ramshaw 2010; Schäfer 2007).

The Biblical texts read and the hymns sung were not especially central to the narratives of the rituals. One reason might be that some time had passed since the rituals. However, all interviewees had refreshed their memories from some document detailing the ritual before speaking about it. Hanna explained that she and her partner selected 1 Cor 13 as a Biblical reading, a verse that is traditionally read at Finnish weddings. In other parts of her narrative, she stressed that they did not want to have nuptial symbols, making the selection of this traditional marriage text a point of interest. Hymns had been sung in these ceremonies, but in many cases the couples could not remember which specific ones. Rather, the importance of the hymn itself seemed to be the act of singing it together. For others, more important than the music were the singers. As Maja and Ritva explain it: “There was a group called Ainokaiset that sung at our wedding. They also sing often at rainbow worship.” Therefore, their connection to the same-sex community was more important than the actual songs. Thus, it can be deduced that hymns and Biblical texts were not personal enough for the participants to focus their memories on them. The role of music and hymns was very different in the Norwegian study on disaster rituals in which the participants in the rituals sought consolation from well-known hymns and Biblical passages (Danbolt & Stifoss-Hanssen 2011). In the case of the same-sex couples of the present study, there was no need to search for consolation from hymns and Biblical passages. Hymns and Biblical passages were not as well remembered as were the personalized parts of the ritual. The religious participants sought a personalized ritual in which their life was recognized and in which God’s blessing was given to their partnership.

Personalized actions were regarded as especially meaningful and therefore highly symbolic (compare to Grimes 2010, 27-30). Thus, the emotional connection implicit in rituals was demonstrated in the various personalized actions described in this study (Schäfer 2007). Emotions motivate us to search for and live a meaningful life (Moschella 2016, 25-27). The same-sex rituals indicate a quest for acceptance and recognition of a partnership through various personalized actions during the ceremony. Personalization made the rituals truly meaningful and memorable to the participants.

## **Double affiliation produces complex forms of conformity and resistance**

Among the couples who wanted to have a religious ritual over their partnership, at least one of the partners was strongly religious – and in many cases both were. The couples represent a minority in the mainstream same-sex culture and in this way express resistance towards the same-sex culture by following the heterosexual traditions. Most of the participants admitted that they have not attended any religious same-sex ceremony other than their own and interpret religious ceremonies as being partly against mainstream gay culture. Ganzevoort et al. share a similar finding that gay Christians had to negotiate their double affiliation with both Christian and gay culture (2011, 221; see also Yip 2004). This double affiliation is further confirmed by Bos, according to whom same-sex culture aimed to be rebellious against all institutions and marriage was interpreted as an outdated and patriarchal institution that bred inequality (2017, 188-189). The participants of this study had thus two cultures toward which to show resistance and this produces complex forms of conformity and resistance.

The rituals narrated in this study were conducted between 2005 and 2015 during which time there seems to have been a shift from rituals of resistance to rituals of conformity following Lash's definition of these two aspects of a ritual. The rituals that had been conducted directly after the law on registered partnerships passed indicated explicit same-sex symbolism, with rainbow-colored objects and language differentiating them from heterosexual ceremonies. Rituals that were conducted most recently were clearly rituals of conformity because there was no longer an explicit need to differentiate them from heterosexual weddings. The significance of personalization raises questions regarding the rigid conceptual dichotomy between rituals of resistance and rituals of conformity. According to the data, it seems that the most important element in the rituals was neither resistance nor conformity but rather having a ritual conducted that was as personal as possible. The participants themselves did not, however, use the wording of conformity and resistance but discussed the ritual especially in regard to the double affiliation and how that influenced its space and actors. Double affiliation further complicates seeing which culture, gay or heterosexual mainstream, a couple is showing resistance or conformity toward.

Srinivasan (1988) uses a division between conformity and reform, which might be a better division than conformity and resistance for the purposes of this study as well. There was some resistance found in the rituals but the findings stress more the importance of following the Lutheran traditions. In many cases, it was a question of the adapting of rituals to a personal situation, which did not indicate any clear resistance. Rituals always carry implicit in them both the transformation and the continuation of traditions which are then negotiated by the community or individuals concerned.

Hüsken & Neubert write: “Not only are rituals frequently disputed; they also constitute a field in which vital and sometimes even violent negotiations take place” (2012, 1). Transformation was an essential aspect in the narrated rituals, but, additionally, the results indicate the importance of the continuation of tradition to the couples concerned. That said, to reiterate, the most important traditions are personalized. This means that the traditions themselves are perpetuated, while ensuring that they hold particular significance for the people involved.

The most important elements of rituals were ones personally tailored to the couple themselves. The feeling of being accepted and being the focus of the ritual were important. Most of the participants of this study were well acquainted with the Lutheran liturgy, hymns and other traditions of the church. However, tailored experiences maintained their position as the most meaningful for them. Personalization of a ritual brings the therapeutic or pastoral care element to it. This personalization is possible only when the facilitators, pastors in the case of this study, were willing to conduct personalized rituals and did not follow the restrictions of the Pastoral guidelines of 2011. Cyril Schäfer’s findings from a funerary ritual study reveal that personalized rituals were considered to be therapeutic and the important facilitators in the personalization were the funerary directors who conducted these rituals (Schäfer 2007).

## **Conclusion**

This article studied the experiences of same-sex couples in connection with a prayer ritual conducted over their registered partnerships. It aimed to analyze conformity and resistance in the participants’ understanding of personalized ritual through Grimes’s categories of language, space, time, and actors.

Most of the participants called their ritual a blessing of a partnership and half of the narrated rituals were called weddings. In most of the rituals there had been at least some nuptial objects used and the rituals, together with a celebration afterwards, resembled weddings in many ways. The time and location of the ritual offered interesting insight into same-sex rituals in Finland. The rituals conducted immediately following the law on registered partnerships in 2001, employed the particular rainbow elements most explicitly. Rituals which were conducted following the Pastoral guidelines of 2011 were conducted most closely in accordance with these guidelines and included fewer nuptial objects. The two most recent ceremonies were the only ones conducted in a sacral space. Stemming from the above, although my qualitative data included full narratives of only seven same-sex rituals, the importance of timing seems to be very strong. The importance of nuptial traditions indicates that ritual conformity was important to the participants of this study.



The same-sex couple themselves were the most important actors in the ritual. They wanted to have the ritual personalized to ensure that they felt like its focal point. The second most important actors were the pastors conducting the ritual, which is why the pastors were carefully selected. Finally, the third most important actors were the guests participating in the ritual. Those invited to attend the ritual varied from friends and relatives to special members of the rainbow community. The most important actions performed were the speeches and prayers, which were personalized to the lives of the couple concerned. Most of the rituals had both elements of resistance, understood as following the same-sex culture, and conformity to heterosexual nuptial traditions. Personalization of the religious rituals was, however, much more important to the same-sex couples of this study than the following of heterosexual traditions in all elements of the ritual.

One aspect that made the same-sex rituals of this study very different from each other was that the only given guidelines, the Pastoral guidelines of 2011, did not include a clear rite for conducting such a ritual; rather it only gave a list of restrictions on which things not to include in a same-sex prayer ritual. This left it quite open to the couples and pastors concerned to plan a very personalized ritual even after the guidelines were given. The participants of the study had double affiliation both in a gay culture and in a Christian culture and this made the elements of ritual even more complex. It was not always easy to evaluate whether a certain element of ritual showed resistance toward mainstream heterosexual culture or toward minority same-sex culture. Even though the division between rituals of conformity and rituals of resistance had some limitations, as was previously discussed, it was found to be a useful tool in analyzing the narrated rituals.

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